

Why 'The Handmaid's Tale' May Not Be an Attack on Christianity After All

In college, I took a world religions class with an openly Christian, brilliant professor with a passion and respect for the religions of the world. On the first day, he said this:

"All religions have the capacity to be used for evil."

He was not only speaking about the many other world religions we would study that semester, but also about his own.

One only needs to study history to be reminded of the people, groups and governments who have committed unfathomable evils in the name of God.

Enter 'The Handmaid's Tale'

Before the Hulu series debuted, I had already read the book. Not knowing what I was getting into, I dove into Margaret Atwood's fictional tale of an American dystopia and was quickly shocked and horrified by the story's contents—yet couldn't stop reading. I didn't know at the time that *The Handmaid's Tale* currently ranks at No. 37 on the American Library Association's 1990-1999 list of the 100 most frequently banned books, and continued to make the list in the following years as well.

The book tells a chilling account of a modern-day America run by a totalitarian, theocratic republic called Gilead, replacing the once-secular, democratic state. It is an echo of the Islamic Republic established in Iran after the 1979 Revolution, which was close to the time that Atwood wrote her novel. However, the villains of this cruel republic are not Muslim; the villains of *The Handmaid's Tale* are fundamentalist

Christians who commit unspeakable acts with the intention of restoring biblical morality to the world.

The Handmaid's Tale provides an opportunity for those of all religions to reflect on the way they are living out their faith, especially those in power.

The main plot revolves around rampant infertility and infant mortality rates of the nation. The Republic of Gilead blames this on fallen morality and is set on restoring it. In this new state, when a member of the pious ruling class cannot have a child—a situation where the blame is always placed on the woman, never on the man—the state sends the family a “handmaid” to conceive in her place. Handmaids are fertile young women who are enslaved, beaten and who live with a sole purpose of providing surrogacy for the ruling class of Gilead. The handmaid is forcibly raped by the husband—“the commander”—in a ceremony every month as she lies on the knees of the commander’s wife.

This is the first of many moments in *The Handmaid's Tale* that make Christians squirm. The rape is justified by the story of Hagar in the Old Testament when Sarah took matters into her own hands and arranged to have her husband sleep with her handmaid as a workaround to fulfill God’s promise that Sarah and Abraham would have a child.

Christians watching might argue that for a theocratic state run by biblical literalists, turning to Sarah as an example for an approved solution to infertility is as an odd interpretation—as we all know that Sarah’s circumvention of God’s plan didn’t exactly turn out as she planned.

But thus, the frustrations begin. Time after time, we watch the elite rulers of Gilead twist Scripture to justify greed, lust, abuse, power and overall evil. Christians have been quick to speak out in defense of their faith, condemning the story as anti-Christian propaganda from a left-wing

entertainment industry set on attacking Christianity, and by association, right-wing, conservative ideologies. The show feels like a personal attack on Christianity, with some dubbing it as “hate speech against Christians,” and the tearing down of Christian values.

And for some secular, left-leaning media, the temptation to connect the dots from Atwood’s fictional world of religious, political fundamentalism to all of the right-leaning associations they dislike is ripe for the picking. It’s a tantalizing temptation for someone unfamiliar with Christianity and ready to insert themselves into a trending political dialogue where they know they have a hungry audience.

However, I would argue that both of these ends of the spectrum are missing the point that Atwood was trying to make altogether.

By doing minimal research, you’ll find that Atwood has shared her thoughts on the fundamentalist Christianity found in her book and the Christianity she knows to be true:

I don't consider these people to be Christians because they do not have at the core of their behavior and ideologies what I, in my feeble Canadian way, would consider to be the core of Christianity ... and that would be not only love your neighbors but love your enemies. That would also be “I was sick and you visited me not” and such and such ... But they don't do that either.

Early Christianity was egalitarian. And it was also very courageous because it underwent various persecutions, as you know, and so it also had its own underground. Of course, faith can be a force for good and often has been. So faith is a force for good particularly when people are feeling beleaguered and in need of hope. So you can have bad iterations and you can also have the iteration in which

people have got too much power and then start abusing it.

But that is human behavior, so you can't lay it down to religion. You can find the same in any power situation, such as politics or ideologies that purport to be atheist. Need I mention the former Soviet Union? So it is not a question of religion making people behave badly. It is a question of human beings getting power and then wanting more of it.

The Handmaid's Tale is not an attack on Christianity, it is an example of a religion gone wrong, an extreme and horrifying example of Christian fanaticism—an example of *religion used for evil*.

Hartwood used Christianity, but it could have easily been another religion.

The story gives a step-by-step assumption that if Christian fundamentalism were so wildly misinterpreted that it paralleled that of the Taliban (a connection that Harwood has admitted to being an inspiration for the book)—and that if this particular sector of misguided Christianity could grow dominant enough to inspire a militarized revolution, our weak democracy would crumble.

No matter who the religion or political group of this fictional tale could have been, the idea of the freedoms of our nation being stripped away—even in the modern, privileged times many of us enjoy—is actually a reminder that we must be ever-diligent about our decisions, our votes, our elected officials, the organizations that receive our support.

Instead of pointing a defensive or accusatory finger, maybe we should turn it back around?

Am I educated on who I will be voting for this election season?

Do I know what is on the ballot and what it means for my

personal freedoms?

The Handmaid's Tale provides an opportunity for those of all religions to reflect on the way they are living out their faith, especially those in power. Faith is not a stepping-stone to political success, wealth or power. And anytime we see it being used in this way, there is cause for concern and intervention.

In fact, I might say that the greatest truth from Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is what my college professor said to us on the first day of my world's religion class: *All religions have the capacity to be used for evil.*

Evil is alive and ever-ready to insert itself into moments of weakness. And the reminder of our human capacity for evil is humbling and in my opinion, a much-needed reminder. To be a Christian means to intimately know and seek the true character of God, something that the rulers of the oppressive republic of Gilead clearly know nothing about.

"Anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love" (1 John 4:8).

"If I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not love, I am nothing" (1 Cor. 13:2).

To know God is to know that it is not in His character to enslave but rather, to know God and understand what His son came to do *sets us free.*

So don't use *The Handmaid's Tale* as ammunition in the political battle raging in our country. Rather, use it to reflect on your own faith and how you are using it—then, commit to using it for *good.* {eo}

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